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Frances Yaping WANG
*Singapore Management University*, franceswang@smu.edu.sg

Brantly WOMACK



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# Jawing through Crises: Chinese and Vietnamese Media Strategies in the South China Sea

Frances Yaping Wang and Brantly Womack

University of Notre Dame, USA; University of Virginia, USA

**ABSTRACT**

Winston Churchill once said, 'it is better to jaw-jaw than to war-war.' However, negotiations are particularly difficult when they are enmeshed in public opinion precommitments. The sharpest crisis between China and Vietnam in the last 30 years concerned the placement of a Chinese oil rig into contested waters in 2014. This study analyses the Chinese and Vietnamese propaganda efforts surrounding the crisis as examples of the instrumental use of propaganda in managing domestic public opinion on diplomatic crises. The article argues that despite very different approaches to public diplomacy during the crisis, both states were primarily concerned with avoiding escalation and ending the confrontation. The authors show how propaganda function as a pacifying device in dealing with rising domestic nationalism when executing a moderate foreign policy.

The Sino-Vietnamese oil rig crisis started on 2 May 2014 when the state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) moved its Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil rig, a semisubmersible drilling platform built in 2012 at a cost of US$ one billion, to a location of maritime dispute between the two countries without prior consultation with Vietnam. The oil rig location, although changed slightly several times throughout the crisis, was about 17 nautical miles South of the Paracel Islands claimed by both countries but currently occupied by China. The location is 130 nautical miles off the Vietnamese coast and 180 nautical miles off China's Hainan Island, so if the Paracel claims are ignored, it lies on the Vietnam side of the equidistance line between the coast of Vietnam and Hainan, and within the two countries' overlapping Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ).[1] China's placement of the oil rig in this location triggered dangerous actions by both sides at sea in the vicinity of the rig such as ramming vessels, firing water cannons, and large-scale deadly riots in Vietnam burning down foreign-owned factories.[2]

The oil rig crisis was the most serious and sustained confrontation between China and Vietnam since the conclusion of the 12 years of active hostility from 1979 to 1991. It marked the high point of tension in the relationship and attracted global attention. In 2011, the RAND Corporation completed a study of the possible venues for armed conflict between the United States and China over a 20-year period.[3] They

**CONTACT** Frances Yaping Wang fwang@virginia.edu

[1]People's Republic of China (PRC) Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), 'The Operation of the HYSY 981 Drilling Rig: Vietnam's Provocation and China's Position', (8 June 2014), available at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1163264.shtml (accessed 28 December 2018); Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), 'Remarks by FM Spokesman Le Hai Binh on 4 May 2014', (4 May 2014), available at: http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns140505232230 (accessed 28 December 2018).

[2]Kate Hodal and Jonathan Kaiman, 'At Least 21 Dead in Vietnam Anti-China protests over oil rig', *The Guardian*, (15 May 2014), available at: http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/15/vietnam-anti-china-protests-oil-rig-dead-injured (accessed 28 December 2018).

[3]James Dobbins, David C. Gompert, David A. Shlapak, and Andrew Scobell, *Conflict with China: Prospects, Consequences, and Strategies for Deterrence* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, OP-344-A, 2011).

concluded that in the order of likelihood, conflict could arise in Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, Japan, the South China Sea, cyberspace, or India. In 2017, RAND revisited the topic.[4] RAND now considers the South China Sea the most likely venue for conflict after Korea: 'What is clear. . .is that this body of water has become the unanticipated focal point of US-Chinese geostrategic rivalry.'[5] The 2014 oil rig crisis leads the list of reasons for heightened US concern. Although war is still considered unlikely, RAND is now less confident that war will not occur.

There are a number of links in the chain of reasoning from the temporary placement of an oil rig in disputed waters and an increased possibility of major war. The first and most solid link is between the oil rig crisis and the general conflict of claims in the South China Sea between China and the littoral Southeast Asian states. Although the Paracel dispute is only bilateral, the claims made by both sides are similar to those made in the more generally contested areas further south. Location makes the South China Sea important. It is the hollow center of maritime Southeast Asia, and China's presence has been seen as intrusive, especially since 2008.[6] A second link is the willingness of regional states to risk war. The magnitude and drama of the oil rig crisis apparently gives credence to willingness to escalate. However, this article will argue that in fact the media behavior of both China and Vietnam showed willingness to moderate and dampen the confrontation. A third link is between regional conflict and US interests. This is the weakest link, since the professed US concern is freedom of navigation and China would be the most at risk if there were disruption in transiting the South China Sea. Although American attention is focused on China's refusal to consider military ships eligible for 'innocent passage' through its Exclusive Economic Zone, many other states share China's stand including Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, India, and Taiwan.[7] As to normal maritime commerce, the RAND report notes, 'closure of the South China Sea to commercial traffic would most heavily affect China because the United States' regional allies have alternate sea lines of communication out to the Pacific.'[8] The current and prospective rivalry between the United States and China is one of asymmetric parity, and the strategic interest of Southeast Asia is to insulate itself from global polarization.[9]

Against this backdrop, the article analyzes the behavior of the Vietnamese and Chinese leadership during the oil rig crisis as they interacted with public opinion through their control of the official media. The contrast between the Vietnamese and Chinese official media behavior in the crisis is both interesting and puzzling. Beijing issued specific guidelines to keep the media from 'hyping' the dispute. A total of 36 *People's Daily* articles were published during the 74 days of the crisis, with none appearing in the front page and most copying the Foreign Ministry's statements. Even after the riots occurred in Vietnam, Beijing ostensibly delayed in reporting the violent events and disciplined the commercial media in following suit. In contrast, *Nhan Dan* (*The People*), the Vietnamese equivalent of China's *People's Daily*, published 224 articles on the dispute, averaging three articles a day. Hanoi did not shy away from using every opportunity to make its point. Even an article on the beauty pageant reads that contestants 'call[ed] for actions to support Vietnam Government to defend its sovereignty in the East Sea and asking China to immediately withdraw its illegal Haiyang Shiyou-981 oil rig and ships off Vietnam's waters.'[10] *Thanh Nien News* (*Youth News*), one of the five most influential newspapers in Vietnam, published 570 articles on the subject, averaging at eight articles a day.[11]

[4]James Dobbins, Andrew Scobell, Edmund J. Burke, David C. Gompert, Derek Grossman, Eric Heginbotham, Howard J. Shatz, *Conflict with China Revisited: Prospects, Consequences, and Strategies for Deterrence* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, PE-248-A, 2017), available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE248.html (accessed 28 December 2018).
[5]Ibid., p. 4.
[6]Alastair Iain Johnston, 'How new and assertive is china's new assertiveness?', *International Security* 37(4), (2013), pp. 7–48; Brantly Womack, 'China and the future status quo', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 8(2), (2015), pp. 115–137.
[7]*U.S. Department of Defense Freedom of Navigation Report for Fiscal Year 2016*, available at: http://policy.defense.gov/OUSDP-Offices/FON/ (accessed 28 December 2018).
[8]Dobbins et al., *Conflict with China Revisited*, p. 5.
[9]Brantly Womack, 'Asymmetric parity: U.S.-China relations in a multinodal world', *International Affairs* 92(6), (2016), pp. 1463–1480.
[10]'Dang Thu Thao crowned Miss Vietnam Oceans 2014', *Nhan Dan*, (26 May 2014), available at: http://en.nhandan.com.vn/culture/lifestyle/item/2536502-dang-thu-thao-crowned-miss-vietnam-oceans-2014.html (accessed 10 May 2018).
[11]Nhung T. Bui, 'Managing anti-China nationalism in Vietnam: evidence from the media during the 2014 oil rig crisis', *The Pacific Review* 30(2), (2017), p. 169.

To explain this stark difference between the two countries' media behaviors, the authors apply a more general theory of media instrumentality developed by Wang, demonstrating that even though the two sides took quite different approaches to media control, they shared the goal of trying to arrive at a face-saving end to the confrontation. This theory demonstrates that state media strategies are a result of existing public opinion and the state's foreign policy intention. A state could use a propaganda campaign counterintuitively to placate an existing strong public opinion in order to meet with its moderate policy intent. This article shows how a state, in this case Vietnam, achieves that. On the flip side, the state keeps quiet on a dispute if the public opinion and the state policy intent are aligned. The Chinese side of the story illustrates this other scenario. Thus, the divergent media behaviors in these two countries are really a result of working with different levels of public opinion in their misalignment or alignment with a state's foreign policy intent. Although there is an international target in the official media's behavior, this research focuses on the domestic audience. The article begins by situating their crisis behavior in the general pattern of the asymmetric relationship between China and Vietnam and the (mis)alignment theory. After providing a brief overview of the Chinese and Vietnamese propaganda system and media control, the article traces the crisis from both sides' perspectives, followed by an analysis of possible alternative explanations. The article ends with a brief discussion of the aftermath of the crisis, the likely path of Sino-Vietnamese relations, and the broader implications of the relationship.

## Asymmetry and domestic misalignment

It would be hard to dispute that Vietnam has an asymmetric relationship with China. Its population of 96 million is fifteenth largest in the world, but roughly equal to the two adjoining Chinese provinces of Guangxi and Yunnan and 7% of China's total. Its Gross National Product is 3% of China's. Vietnam's total trade with China was 20% of its total trade in 2015, half again as much as its trade with the rest of ASEAN or with the United States.[12] Vietnam's military budget is estimated at less than 1% of China's, even though on a per capita basis it spends more than twice as much of its GDP on the military.[13] One-quarter of international tourists to Vietnam in 2013 were from China, though the numbers went down after the oil rig crisis. In ASEAN more generally Chinese were 17% of all ASEAN tourists in 2015, by far the largest single nationality and double the number of Europeans.[14] From the viewpoint of China, Vietnam is a significant but not major trading partner at 2.4% of total trade, roughly the same as Malaysia and half that of Taiwan.

Clearly China is more powerful than Vietnam, and China is more important to Vietnam than Vietnam is to China. It follows that Vietnam is structurally more exposed to China, in terms of both risk and opportunity, than China is to Vietnam. Nevertheless, the 12 years of hostility demonstrated that neither could impose its will on the other. Moreover, Vietnam's earlier conflicts with relatively more powerful opponents, France and the United States, confirmed the resistance capacity of the smaller side in an asymmetric relationship.[15] Since 1991, there have been many tensions between China and Vietnam but the tensions have not been allowed to threaten the overall relationship. In 2008, they announced a 'comprehensive strategic partnership,' which indicates a high but not exclusive status for the relationship.[16]

This article finds that it is this asymmetry that induced a sense of insecurity in the Vietnamese public, creating a stronger public opinion in Vietnam than in China, thus resulting in the state-public misalignment in Vietnam but alignment in China. When the state intent is more moderate

[12]Calculated from data supplied by the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, available at: http://www.gso.gov.vn (accessed 28 December 2018).
[13]Calculated from *CIA World Factbook*, available at: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/ (accessed 28 December 2018).
[14]Calculated from ASEAN Statistics Database, available at: https://data.aseanstats.org/ (accessed 28 December 2018).
[15]Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[16]Georg Strüver, 'China's partnership diplomacy: international alignment based on interest or ideology', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 10(1), (2017), pp. 31–65; and Feng Zhongping, Huang Jing, 'China's strategic partnership diplomacy: engaging with a changing world', *European Strategic Partnerships Observatory Working Paper 8* (June 2014), available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2459948 (accessed 28 December 2018).

than public opinion, in this case Vietnam, the state uses a propaganda campaign to keep up the appearances of a hard stand to appease the public on one hand, and on the other to mollify public opinion by echoing their emotions and letting them vent. In this way, the state brings a strong public opinion in line with its moderate policy intent. Media studies of the short attention span of the public, social psychology studies on the soothing effects of violence in media, and studies on the tranquilizing effects of social media, all offer strong support for these mechanisms.[17] This pacifying function of the propaganda is different from the common perception of propaganda, but is commonly practiced, and increasingly so, by popular authoritarian states in working with rising domestic nationalism. When public opinion and state policy are aligned, in this case China, the state keeps quiet.

## Media control and popular nationalism in China and Vietnam

Both Vietnam and China have party-state systems, in which the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and the Communist Party of China (CPC) have the preponderant power in their respective country's political, economic and social life. All print media are owned by or under effective control of the respective Communist party. Although there are various degrees of commercialization among a diverse range of media outlets, both states maintain effective administrative and legal means to regulate media. The government supervises senior personnel appointments at main media outlets, monitors and censors media content on a day-to-day basis, issues general guidelines and specific directives on what issues to cover and how they should be covered, and sanctions or even jails journalists who act against the state mandate. By the end of the twentieth century, both countries witnessed a burst of growth in the Internet and social media, which have provided a platform for social activism.[18] But the states have also adapted by developing more sophisticated tools such as new censorship system, technologies, and Internet trolls, and by streamlining legal and organizational supervision.[19]

Having been through a long period of colonialization and several major wars against foreign powers, Vietnam has a relatively shorter time for state building and economic development, so arguably it has weaker central control than China. Moreover, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh Vietnam did not experience political repression comparable to China's Anti-Rightist Campaign of

[17]For Media Studies on the 'issue attention cycle' hypothesis that explains the public's short attention span, see Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 2010); Carol A Bodensteiner, 'Predicting public and media attention span for social issues', *Public Relations Quarterly* 40(2), (1995), p. 14; Anthony Downs, 'Up and down with ecology: the "Issue-attention cycle"', *The Public (1972)*. For Social Psychology studies on the effects of violence in media, see Joan Murray and Feshbach Seymour, 'Let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater: the Catharsis hypothesis revisited', *Journal of Personality* 46(3), (1978), pp. 462–473. For studies on the effects of social media, see Christopher Cairns and Allen Carlson, 'Real-world islands in a social media sea: nationalism and censorship on Weibo during the 2012 Diaoyu/Senkaku Crisis', *The China Quarterly* 225, (2016), p. 49; Jonathan Hassid, 'Safety valve or pressure cooker? Blogs in Chinese political life', *Journal of Communication* 62(2), (2012), pp. 212–230; and Rebecca MacKinnon, 'Flatter world and thicker walls? Blogs, censorship and civic discourse in China', *Public Choice* 134(1–2), (2008), pp. 31–46.

[18]Some scholars argue for the Internet's erosive effects on the state control, see Daniel C. Lynch, *After the Propaganda State: Media, Politics, and 'Thought Work' in Reformed China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Geoffry Taubman, 'A not-so world wide web: the internet, China, and the challenges to nondemocratic rule', *Political Communication* 15(2), (1998), pp. 255–272; Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009); and Jonathan Sullivan and Lei Xie, 'Environmental activism, social networks and the internet', *The China Quarterly* 198(June), (2009), pp. 422–432.

[19]See Min Jiang, 'The co-evolution of the internet, (un)civil society & authoritarianism in China', in Jacques deLisle et al., ed., *The Internet, Social Media, and A Changing China* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Maria Repnikova and Kecheng Fang, 'Authoritarian participatory persuasion 2.0: netizens as thought work collaborators in China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 113(27), (2018), pp. 763–779; Jesper Schlæger and Min Jiang, 'Official microblogging and social management by local governments in China', *China Information* 28(2), (2014), pp. 189–213; Rongbin Han, 2015, 'Defending the authoritarian regime online: china's "Voluntary fifty-cent army"', *The China Quarterly* 224(December), (2015), pp. 1006–1025; Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, 'How the Chinese government fabricates social media posts for strategic distraction, not engaged argument', *American Political Science Review* 111(3), (2017), pp. 484–501; and Rogier Creemers, 'Cyber China: upgrading propaganda, public opinion work and social management for the twenty-first century', *Journal of Contemporary China* 26(103), (2017), pp. 85–100.

1957 or the Cultural Revolution. As a result, civil society is much more active in Vietnam than in China. Internet use is also freer in Vietnam than in China. For example, Google and *New York Times* websites are accessible in Vietnam but are blocked in China. Despite these differences in the degree of control, the organizational and legal means for the CPV to tighten the rein of media control when they feel the need are still in place and frequently resorted to.[20] For example, Google is required to maintain its servers inside Vietnam, so that it is easier for Hanoi to censor content whenever it feels the need to.[21] Freedom House reports that 'In 2013, the [Vietnamese] government increased its repression of print and online journalists, jailing more than twice as many writers and bloggers in 2013 as it did the previous year.'[22] 'In September [2013], the state introduced Decree 72, which restricted all websites and social media from publishing anything that "provides information that is against Vietnam".'[23] Freedom House rates both countries a score of 4 out of 16 in 2014 on 'Freedom of Expression and Belief.'[24]

Besides the authoritarian rule and tight media control, both countries have witnessed the rise of popular nationalism in recent years. Some scholars argue that this is a direct result of state instigation, in part to divert public attention away from domestic problems such as rampant corruption, growing inequality, and sluggish economic performance since the 2008 global financial crisis.[25] Others argue that nationalism is promoted to fill the ideological gap to consolidate regime legitimacy after both countries' loosening the Marxist-Leninist ideals to incorporate the capitalist economic instruments.[26]

While there is ongoing debate about how much influence the public has over the state and the state over the public in authoritarian states, the consensus is a mixed one. On one hand, there is increasing evidence suggesting that genuine, bottom-up public opinion does exist. The rise of the Internet has resulted in broader public engagement in foreign policy. Diversification of information sources makes it harder, if not impossible, for the government to hide a dispute entirely. Together with stronger nationalist sentiment in the public, these changes put more constraints to decision-making in foreign policy.[27] But on the other, the public's influence is hardly ever decisive, as the state has a legion of resources and means to change public opinion to meet its policy needs.[28] This article focuses on one of these means.

## The oil rig crisis from Hanoi's perspective: defending the fatherland

At the beginning of the crisis, the Vietnamese government faced an existing strong public opinion, yet the state itself preferred an overall moderate policy. Analysts observe a growing rift between a

[20]The U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors, 'Media Use in Vietnam 2013', available at: http://www.bbg.gov/wp-content/media/2013/12/Vietnam-research-brief-final1.pdf (accessed 28 December 2018).

[21]The Freedom House, 'Freedom in the World 2014, Vietnam', available at: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/vietnam (accessed 28 December 2018).

[22]Ibid.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid.; Freedom House, 'Freedom in the World 2014, China', available at: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/china (accessed 28 December 2018).

[25]Le Hong Hiep, 'Performance-based legitimacy: the case of the communist party of Vietnam and Doi Moi', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 34(2), (2012), pp. 145–172.

[26]Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-state by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); and Peter H. Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Stanford, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

[27]See, for example, Joseph Fewsmith and Stanley Rosen, 'The domestic context of Chinese foreign policy: does "Public opinion" matter?', in David M. Lampton ed., *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform, 1978–2000* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 151–187; Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2004); James Reilly, 2011, *Strong Society, Smart State: The Rise of Public Opinion in China's Japan Policy* (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011); Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007); Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction*; Suisheng Zhao, 'China's pragmatic nationalism: is it manageable?', *The Washington Quarterly* 29(1), (2005), pp. 131–144; and Suisheng Zhao, 'Foreign policy implications of Chinese nationalism revisited: the strident turn', *Journal of Contemporary China* 22(82), (2013), pp. 535–553.

[28]Almost all of the above studies recognize the limited role of public opinion in influencing foreign policy in these states. For specific means that states adopt to subdue popular nationalism, see Kai Quek and Alastair Iain Johnston, 2018, 'Can China back down? Crisis de-escalation in the shadow of popular opposition', *International Security* 42(3), (2018), pp. 7–36.

nationalist public and a reserved government in Vietnam during the oil rig crisis. Malesky and Morris-Jung note that 'the oil rig crisis highlighted a growing gap between state leadership and the wider Vietnamese society' and 'increasing polarization between state and society.'[29] Bui's examination of 570 *Thanh Nien News* (*Youth News*) articles during the crisis also shows 'some gap between the official news stories and readers' comments,' and that 'The public's response is arguably more emotional and more demanding of a tougher position.'[30]

The surge in Vietnamese public opinion against China regarding South China Sea sovereignty issues could be traced back to 2007. A senior Chinese Vietnam specialist revealed that anti-China protests on the South China Sea dispute started in 2007 when internal Chinese consideration of elevating the administrative status of Sansha County to the prefecture level leaked to Hanoi. Hanoi decided to mobilize college students to stage regular protests to pressure the Chinese to drop the plan.[31] The staged anti-China protests succeeded in deterring Beijing from pursuing the Sansha City plan until June 2012, when the Vietnamese National Assembly passed the 'Vietnamese Law of the Sea' making claims to the Paracels and the Spratlys. Beijing retaliated by following through with the Sansha City plan one month later. The regular weekend protests, however, raised awareness and intensified emotions on the dispute among the Vietnamese public, marking the beginning of a downward spiral in the Vietnamese public opinion against China.

The strong public opinion on the South China Sea dispute against China gained momentum at the encouragement of America's 'Pivot to Asia' policy, with a benchmark event in July 2010 featuring a heated debate at the ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi led by the then US State Secretary Hilary Clinton. Vietnam's nationalist public opinion reached a small climax in the summer of 2011 when Chinese maritime patrol ships severed the seismic survey cables of Vietnamese energy exploration vessels on two occasions. Angry Vietnamese once again took to the street, but this time more bottom-up than top-down. The protests continued for 2 months.[32]

The bilateral relationship received a respite from the South China Sea dispute in 2013 and early 2014. But even during this relatively calm period, anti-China rallies flared anew in the summer of 2013 and were cracked down by the government, demonstrating the ongoing genuine and strong public emotions on the issue.[33] A Pew Global Attitudes Survey taken during 16 April–8 May 2014 in Vietnam right before and at the very beginning of the oil rig crisis shows that 78% of respondents had unfavorable opinion of China and only 16% of respondents had favorable opinion. This contrasts sharply to the Vietnamese' overwhelming favorability towards all other major powers in the region—the United States (76% favorable), Russia (75% favorable), Japan (79% favorable), and India (67% favorable).[34]

Yet logical deductions and evidence of the actual policy pursued by Hanoi suggest a moderate state policy intent. First, Hanoi had little incentive to escalate the tension and damage the bilateral relationship with China. The Vietnamese economy was asymmetrically dependent on China. Prior to the crisis, China had become Vietnam's largest trading partner, reaching about $50 billion total turnover in 2013.[35] China was also 'the sixth-largest investor by the number of projects and fourteenth largest by the total capital (about $14.7 billion) invested, respectively.'[36] Given China's rapidly growing appetite for overseas investment, there was great potential for further growth in bilateral investment.

[29]Edmund Malesky and Jason Morris-Jung, 'Vietnam in 2014: uncertainty and opportunity in the wake of the HS-981 crisis', *Asian Survey* 55(1), (2015), p. 169, p. 170.
[30]Bui, 'Managing anti-China nationalism in Vietnam', p. 183.
[31]Interview with Chinese analyst, 20 November 2017, Washington DC.
[32]Interview with Vietnamese analyst who experienced firsthand the protests against the cable cutting incidents, 21 February 2017, Hanoi.
[33]'Rare Protest in Vietnam Raises a Call to Curb China', *New York Times*, (3 June 2013), available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/03/world/asia/rare-protest-in-vietnam-raises-call-to-curb-china.html (accessed 28 December 2018).
[34]Pew Research Center Global Attitudes and Trends Datasets, available at: http://www.pewglobal.org/datasets/ (accessed 28 December 2018).
[35]'China remains Vietnam's biggest trade partner in 2013', *Xinhua News*, (29 January 2014), available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/chinadata/2014-01/29/content_17264283.htm (accessed 28 December 2018).
[36]Malesky and Morris-Jung, 'Vietnam in 2014', p. 172.

Admittedly, Hanoi's attitude towards the public protests at the beginning of crisis was permissive, at times even encouraging. The Vietnamese police watched on as hundreds (which later grew into thousands) of demonstrators marched the streets of cities around the country and protested outside the Chinese embassy.[37] They even cheered the demonstrators on by 'broadcasting complaints about China's actions' using loudspeakers 'atop police vans,' inviting state television to record the event, and handing out banners saying 'We entirely trust the party, the government and the people's army.'[38] Nevertheless, Hanoi was well aware of the danger of public protests turning against itself. The violent riots that took place on 13–14 May 2014 gave a sobering alarm to the CPV leaders that the strong public opinion, if left unfettered, could go out of hand. Scores of factories were damaged in the rampage, including those managed by South Koreans and Taiwanese. One Chinese company reported four deaths and 130 casualties.[39] The Vietnamese leadership responded quickly, arresting 300 persons involved in the rioting. China evacuated more than 3000 of its citizens and, not surprisingly, Chinese tourism dried up.[40] As General Hoang Cong Tu of the Vietnamese Ministry of Public Security put it, 'they [the rioters] have seriously undermined the country's image, and such action has to be punished.'[41]

No government looks kindly on riots, but the CPV had two additional reasons to worry about anti-China disturbances. First, it could not afford to adopt officially an anti-China stance. In its asymmetric relationship with China, Vietnam has learned the price of hostility.[42] Its 1979 border war with China led to ten years of stalemate and contributed to international isolation. Any responsible Vietnamese government would have to live with China. The islands in the South China Sea arouse the popular imagination because they involve claims of national territory, but they are less important than the rest of the China–Vietnam relationship.

Second, the leadership knew well that anti-China sentiment could easily connect to an anti-regime agenda. An open letter by 61 party members in late July illustrates the linkage: on one hand, the letter called for 'liberating … from dependence upon China' and 'promptly sue China at an international tribunal'; on the other, it blamed the regime for the current situation, and demanded 'abandoning the erroneous policies of building socialism and decisively veering towards a national and democratic direction, focusing on a moderate transformation of the political regime from its present totalitarianism to a democratic system.'[43] Senior Vietnamese analysts affiliated with a government think tank point to the internal debate and the cleavage between the anti-China, the more liberal faction led by the Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and the pro-China, the more conservative faction led by the Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, with one constantly checked and balanced by the other.[44] This is also evident in the CPV Central Committee's ninth plenary session, which took place during 8–14 May 2014, a few days after the Chinese placement of the oil rig and whilst the riots broke out. Thayer reports that 'A heated debate erupted about how Vietnam should respond to China's challenge.'[45]

[37]For a more detailed account of the anti-China protests in Vietnam, see John D. Ciorciari and Jessica Chen Weiss, 'Nationalist protests, government responses, and the risk of escalation in interstate disputes', *Security Studies* 25(3), (2016), pp. 546–583.

[38]'Vietnam allows anti- China protest over oil rig', *Daily Mail*, (10 May 2014), available at: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-2625366/Vietnam-allows-anti-China-protest-oil-rig.html (accessed 10 May 2018).

[39]Gerry Mulany, 'Chinese company puts death toll in Vietnam riots at 4', *New York Times*, (21 May 2014), available at: https://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/21/chinese-company-puts-death-toll-in-vietnam-riots-at-4/ (accessed 28 December 2018).

[40]Jane Perlez, 'Vietnamese officials intolerant of violence as standoff with China continues', *New York Times*, (17 May 2014), available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/world/asia/vietnamese-officials-intolerant-of-violence-as-standoff-with-china-continues.html (accessed 28 December 2018).

[41]Ibid.

[42]Womack, *China and Vietnam*.

[43]'An open letter by 61 party members to the central executive committee and all members of the communist party of Vietnam', (28 July 2014), available at: https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/custom_search/Letter%20from%2061%20Vietnamese%20Party%20members.pdf (accessed 28 December 2018).

[44]Interview with two Vietnamese analysts, 23 February 2014, Hanoi.

[45]Carl Thayer, '4 reasons China removed oil rig HYSY-981 sooner than planned', *The Diplomat*, (22 July 2014), available at: https://thediplomat.com/2014/07/4-reasons-china-removed-oil-rig-hysy-981-sooner-than-planned/ (accessed 28 December 2018).

As the oil rig crisis continued, Hanoi adopted a three-pronged response—sending law enforcement vessels to the location of the rig to protest and disrupt the Chinese activities; establishing bilateral channels for negotiations; and rallying international pressure to force the Chinese to retreat. Admittedly, this can be seen as a hardline stance. China accused Vietnam for ramming Chinese ships 'for a total of 1416 times,' in addition to 'send[ing] frogmen and other underwater agents to the area, and dropped large numbers of obstacles, including fishing nets and floating objects, in the waters.'[46] But it was not clear whether the Vietnamese vessels were there merely to voice protest, or they were aggressively breaking through the Chinese cordon and disrupting the Chinese activities by ramming Chinese ships. The authors estimate that there was some ramming initiated by both sides as well as incidental collisions due to the crowded space. A ship's actions could also be easily misunderstood for aggressiveness given such a situation. While the jury is still out on this point, one thing certain is that the Vietnamese presence in the disputed area was required if it were to maintain its claim strength to the Paracels. As Womack points out, 'The method of establishing territorial claims in international law has the pernicious effect of maximizing confrontation and hostility… unchallenged occupation is nine-tenths of the law. Thus each has an incentive to increase its presence and to protest or oppose occupation by others, and all parties to the dispute have done both repeatedly over the past forty years.'[47] Therefore, the lack of action on the Vietnamese part could potentially be damaging to the Vietnamese claim. So even if the Chinese accusation were true, the Vietnamese actions had a defensive nature.

In addition, Hanoi was very proactive in seeking out bilateral channels with their Chinese counterparts. 'Immediately after the oil rig crisis broke out, Vietnam's leaders adopted a conciliatory diplomatic posture.'[48] Hanoi requested the activation of a hotline between senior leaders, offered to send a special envoy, and pressed for a visit by its party general secretary. With all things considered, Vietnam's actual policy was reactive and proportionate, indicating a moderate policy intent.

The state-public misalignment thus required the CPV to align public opinion with its intended moderate policy before its implementation. Hanoi utilized the pacifying function of the propaganda—one that is not commonly known but is increasingly practiced by popular autocrats, to clear the way for a moderate foreign policy.

First, Hanoi used the harsh rhetoric to keep up the appearances of a tough stance towards China to appeal to the public demand, but issued no threats of substantive punishment. The challenge of nationalistic public criticism was strong and real. Bui reports that '[readers] posted comments [below the news articles] were critical of the government's late reporting of the oil rig installation and the relatively mild statements by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson in the first few days.'[49] To appease the nationalistic public demand, the state issued strongly-worded statements, condemning the Chinese actions as 'brazen,' 'illegal,' and 'intimidating.'[50] At the ASEAN Summit on May 11, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung made a high-profile pitch to other ASEAN leaders and criticized China's behavior as a 'direct threat' to regional peace and stability. Vietnamese media covered these statements extensively.

But none of these statements had real teeth. Hanoi issued only vague and weak threats such as 'Vietnam has to take defensive measures in response' or 'Vietnam will take appropriate measures.'[51] When asked whether Vietnam will follow the example of the Philippines to sue

[46]PRC MoFA, 'The operation of the HYSY 981 drilling rig: Vietnam's provocation and China's position', (8 June 2014), available at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1163264.shtml (accessed 28 December 2018).
[47]Brantly Womack, 'The Spratlys: from dangerous ground to apple of discord,' *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33(3), (2011), pp. 373–374.
[48]Thayer, '4 reasons'.
[49]Bui, 'Managing Anti-China Nationalism in Vietnam', p. 180.
[50]SRV MoFA, 'Regular Press Briefing by MOFA's Spokesperson Le Hai Binh On 15 May 2014', (15 May 2014), available at: http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns140516233943 (accessed 28 December 2018).
[51]Bui, 'Managing Anti-China Nationalism in Vietnam', p. 175.

China in international court, the Foreign Ministry did not provide a clear answer.[52] Even Prime Minister Dung, the strongest advocate of the legal action, stated that 'timing was crucial.'[53] Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh's remark at the Shangri-La Dialogue on May 31 that the legal action was only 'a last resort' also confirms the hollow content of the strong rhetoric.[54]

The Vietnamese media also gave broad coverage to the confrontations in the conflict zone. But instead of focusing on the Chinese aggressiveness, the media focused on the 'heroic' actions of the Vietnamese maritime law enforcement officers in 'defending the fatherland.' In Bui's analysis of the *Thanh Nien News* articles, this theme took up the majority of the articles (146 of 570 articles (25.6%)). This type of framing serves the purpose of showcasing that the government was taking active actions, in order to fend off the nationalistic criticisms against the government. This media approach to 'channel popular anger and animosity into a more positive form of pro-government nationalism' confirms the causal logic of the alignment theory.[55]

Secondly, the state used the propaganda campaign to subdue the strong public emotions so that a moderate policy could eventually be carried out. On one hand, the state allowed the public to vent on social media and online comment sections. Unless the online posts explicitly targeted at the Vietnamese leadership or called for collective actions, public discussions to express outrage and vent frustrations were generally allowed and even encouraged. On the other, the state walked the fine line between criticizing the Chinese actions and avoiding intensifying anti-China sentiments. The state achieved this through three approaches. Firstly, the Vietnamese government channeled public anger toward patriotism and national unity, as mentioned earlier. Bui finds *Thanh Nien News* articles highlight 'the need for national unity, encouragement for maritime enforcement officers, relief for affected fishermen, and above all, confidence in the government's ability to resolve the situation.'[56] Secondly, the government echoed anti-China public emotions in moderation and in third persons such as foreign observers.[57] Echoing provides a sense of agreement and support; but echoing in moderation and in foreign observers' assessments prevents the exacerbation of the nationalist emotions and avoids unintended escalations with the foreign rival. Lastly, the government refrained from referencing to historical disputes. The fact that very few articles referenced to the historical disputes between the two countries is strong evidence that the Vietnamese government was not overly enthusiastic about inciting domestic public emotion on the current crisis. Recalling historical grievances is the easiest way to ignite public hatred. But 'China's forceful expulsion of Vietnamese forces from the Crescent Group in the Paracel islands in 1974, the Johnson South Reef skirmish in 1988, or even the border war in 1979 were hardly mentioned in most reports.'[58]

## The oil rig crisis from Beijing's perspective: keeping quiet

The Chinese media behavior stood in stark contrast with the Vietnamese. The government made conscious efforts to control information, discourage coverage, and even censor content. This is due to the overall alignment of the state and the public on the issue, with an existing moderate public opinion and a moderate state policy intent.

Compared to the extensive coverage in Vietnam, the Chinese were remarkably quiet. Beijing's reluctance to publicize the dispute was evident in four media features. First, Beijing deliberately

[52]SRV MoFA, 'International press conference on China's downed drilling rig in Vietnam's waters', (7 May 2014), available at: http://www.mofa.gov.vn/vi/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns140509011156 (accessed 28 December 2018).
[53]Thayer, '4 reasons'.
[54]*Shangri_La Dialogue Report*, 13th Asia Security Summit, Singapore, May 30—1 June 2014, International Institute for Strategic Studies, p. 29, available at: https://www.iiss.org/-/media/Silos/ShangriLa/2014/Shangri-La-Dialogue-Report-2014.pdf (accessed 28 December 2018).
[55]Ibid., p. 169.
[56]Ibid., p. 169.
[57]Ibid., p. 179.
[58]Ibid.

delayed the reporting of the riots in Vietnam. Anti-China protests in Hanoi and a few other cities started on 11 May and escalated to violent riots on the 13th and 14th. But *Xinhua News* did not release any Chinese report until midnight of the 15th—that is almost two days' delay. Other Chinese media all cautiously followed *Xinhua*'s steps.[59]

Second, Beijing limited the coverage. *People's Daily*, the most authoritative official Chinese newspaper, had little coverage of the dispute at all—a total of 36 articles and no front-page articles during the 74 days of the crisis between 2 May– 15 July. China's limited reportage was only reactive to Vietnam's aggressive propaganda campaign, especially its international campaign. Chinese MoFA spokesperson Hua Chunying said on June 9th Press Conference: '[Vietnam] spreading rumors around the world to vilify and hurt China unscrupulously and groundlessly. Given that, we must present the facts in front of the international community so as to set the record straight.' Besides this reactive coverage, the Chinese reporting was sparse.

Third, Beijing buried the coverage in low-traffic sections of the papers. Similar patterns were observed on all official media outlets and major commercial news portals.[60] On the day *People's Daily* and *Xinhua News* reported the riots, both websites had domestic news as headlines, while having news on the riots only as the fourth and the fifth item. This technique made the dispute less visible, while still making information available if people searched for it. In this way, the CPC could dampen the issue without leaving the issue to the whims of the Western media.

Fourth, Beijing softened the tone in accusing Hanoi. After the riots, Chinese MoFA spokesperson Hua Chunying blamed the violence on the 'Vietnamese government's indulgence and connivance toward domestic anti-China forces and criminals.'[61] But the wording in the final released official transcript was changed to 'the Vietnamese side has an inescapable responsibility…'[62] Compared to 'responsibility,' 'connivance' was a more serious accusation.

These media features corroborate the media policy directives leaked by *China Digital Times*.[63] There are four leaked policy directives on the dispute. On 7 May, propaganda authorities instructed online media to 'continue to find and delete reports on Sino-Vietnamese ship collisions and maritime standoff.'[64] On the anti-China riots, an order was issued on 14 May to 'not report on the issue, republish foreign coverage, or allow discussion in online forums.'[65] After *Xinhua* released the news, the order was changed on the 15th to 'use only the *Xinhua* copy or information from the Foreign Ministry's website.'[66] On the 18th, the state issued a second warning that the media must 'use *Xinhua* copy only.'[67] The authors' interviews with Chinese editors and journalists also confirm

[59]'中国媒体谨慎报道越南事态' ['Chinese Media Cautious in Reporting the Vietnam Incident'], *BBC Chinese*, (16 May 2014), available at: http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/china/2014/05/140516_china_vietnam_press (accessed 28 December 2018).

[60]Andrew Chubb, 'China's information management in the Sino-Vietnamese confrontation: caution and sophistication in the internet era', *China Brief* 14(11), (2014), p. 15.

[61]'Vietnam factory protests result in 2 dead, 129 injured; Chinese workers flee', *Bloomberg News*, (15 May 2014), available at: http://www.oregonlive.com/playbooks-profits/index.ssf/2014/05/vietnam_factory_protests_resul.html (accessed 28 December 2018).

[62]PRC MoFA, 'Foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying's regular press conference on 15 May 2014', available at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1156451.shtml (accessed 28 December 2018).

[63]*China Digital Times* regularly publishes leaked directives from Chinese propaganda agencies. Although useful, this source needs to be cross-checked by further evidence.

[64]真理部 [The Truth Department], '高瑜, 外逃贪官, 邓力群, 越南海军和比特币' ['Gao Yu, Fled Corrupt Officials, Deng Liqun, Vietnamese Navy and Bitcoin'], *China Digital Times*, (7 May 2014), available at: https://goo.gl/mpFi7s (accessed 28 December 2018).

[65]真理部 [The Truth Department], '在越中资企业被越南人冲击' ['Chinese Companies in Vietnam Were Attacked'], *China Digital Times*, (14 May 2014), available at: https://goo.gl/uT1Evq (accessed 28 December 2018).

[66]真理部 [The Truth Department], '在越企业, 魏鹏远, 转基因粮油和深圳快播' ['Chinese Companies in Vietnam, Wei Pengyuan, Genetically Modified Grain and Oil, and Shenzhen QVOD Player'], *China Digital Times*, (15 May 2014), available at: https://goo.gl/v94Dyn (accessed 28 December 2018).

[67]真理部 [The Truth Department], '新疆喀什案, 越南企业和中国的挨打史' ['Xinjiang Kashgar Incident, Factories in Vietnam, and A Chinese History of Being Bullied'], *China Digital Times*, (18 May 2014), available at: https://goo.gl/4JhQKu (accessed 28 December 2018).

these leaked directives. Editors from a hardline newspaper revealed that after publishing a couple of articles on the topic, they were asked to 'tone down their voice.'[68]

Why did the Chinese authorities not stoke nationalism and use it to coerce Hanoi into accepting the fait accompli on the sea? This is due to the state-public alignment on the issue: the state intended an overall moderate policy, so it wanted to reserve policy flexibility by restricting public participation; the existing weak public opinion allowed the government to pursue such a policy without having to resort to the propaganda's pacifying effect like Hanoi did. In other words, the state did not need to pacify an already moderate public.

Despite the appearance of Chinese provocation by moving the oil rig into a disputed area and engaging in dangerous confrontation with the Vietnamese ships, strong evidence suggests that Beijing had a moderate policy intent.

Why China moved the oil rig to disputed waters in the first place is still debated. As mentioned earlier, the bilateral relationship was showing a promising upward trend since early 2013 that Beijing should have little incentive to disrupt. Prior to the crisis, the two countries had enjoyed a rather cordial relationship, marked by the exchange of high-level visits by Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang to Beijing in June 2013 and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to Hanoi in October 2013. During these visits, the two sides restated their commitment to peace and stability in the South China Sea. As a concrete achievement, the China-Vietnam expert group for low-sensitivity maritime cooperation and consultation was established in December 2013, just months before the crisis was touched off.[69] China also engaged with ASEAN on the Implementation of the Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) at the tenth joint working group meeting in Singapore on 18 March 2014 and was working out a number of confidence building measures under the DOC at the seventh ASEAN-China Senior Officials' Meeting on the Implementation of the DOC in Thailand on 21 April 2014. These occurred just weeks before the placement of the oil rig.

Therefore, the placement of the oil rig came as a shock to many observers, as it reversed the previous Chinese behavior and did not appear like an ad hoc decision made by an unruly CNOOC acting alone. According to the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry, the oil rig was protected by '109 and 125 vessels' formed in '3 rings,' 'including 4–6 warships, 2 missile frigates numbered 534 and 572 operating at 20–25 nautical miles from the oil rig, 2 pairs of minesweepers vessels numbered 840, 843 or 839, 842 (rotating daily) at about 15–25 nautical miles from the rig, and 2 pairs of fast attack ships numbered 751, 756, or 753 and an unidentified ship (rotating daily).'[70] As Chinese scholar Shi Yinhong points out, no agency other than the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) can command navy warships, especially on this scale.[71] The military was clearly involved.

What then explains this sudden reversal of the Chinese behavior? Among the many speculations, an explanation of irrational decision making combining a lack of interorganizational coordination, an underestimate of Vietnamese reaction, and path dependency seems to prevail.[72] If this explanation is true, the Chinese initial provocation was then a result of unintended miscalculation. As disclosed in private interviews to policy analysts close to the decision-making process, moving the oil rig to the disputed area was 'without the proper consultation with the Foreign Ministry, and likely without direct involvement of the top leadership.'[73] A retired government official frequently consulted on Vietnamese affairs attests: 'our policy (in placing the rig) in 2014 was not very

[68]Interviews with Chinese editors, May 29 and 31 May 2017, Beijing.
[69]PRC MoFA, 'China and Vietnam held plenary meeting of the governmental delegation on border negotiation', (7 December 2013), available at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1108277.shtml (accessed 28 December 2018).
[70]SRV MoFA, 'The 6th regular press conference', (26 June 2014), available at: http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_baochi/tcbc/ns140628000810 (accessed 28 December 2018).
[71]Jane Perlez, 'Vietnamese officials intolerant of violence'.
[72]For an enumeration of these speculations, see Carl Thayer, 'China's oil rig gambit: South China sea game-changer?', *The Diplomat*, (12 May 2014), available at: https://thediplomat.com/2014/05/chinas-oil-rig-gambit-south-china-sea-game-changer/ (accessed 28 December 2018).
[73]Interview with Chinese analyst, 31 May 2017, Beijing.

stable…it was not a decision made by the top leadership after careful rumination.'[74] When asked on 11 June 2014 to confirm the Vietnamese remarks that 'China has sent six warships to guard its oil rig,' Chinese MoFA spokesperson Hua Chunying replied 'we have sent government vessels to the site for security.'[75] 'Government vessels' should mean maritime law enforcement vessels, not navy ships. This happened again on June 13 with MoFA Deputy Director General of the Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs Yi Xianliang. When asked whether the Vietnamese statement about China sending navy warships was true, Yi said '…we had to send Coast Guard ships…'[76] It is not clear, however, whether Hua and Yi were skillfully deflecting the question or simply not notified of the navy ships. In late August, Vietnamese special envoy Le Hong Anh visited Beijing in an effort to mend fences. In his talks with Chinese Party seniors, he unusually stressed the need for the two parties to 'tighten their instructions.' The words 'tighten instructions' were repeated four times in a short two-page report of the meeting.[77] This implies that the explanation given privately to Anh involved a lack of coordination on the Chinese side.

A Crisis Group report offers a slightly different story, but also confirms the irrational decision model. Based on an interview with a 'security agency-affiliated Chinese analyst,' the report asserts that 'The Central Leading Small Group on the Protection of Maritime Interests, created in 2012 and reportedly led, at least initially, directly by Xi, made the decision in the oil rig case. The foreign ministry was said to be represented by the Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs, whose "primary concern is sovereignty", without Department of Asian Affairs input.' Thus the decision was made without 'consultation with experts who understand Vietnam.'[78] The authors' interviews with Chinese experts routinely consulted on Vietnamese Affairs by Beijing indirectly confirms this latter point. They said that the placement of the rig 'came as a shock,' which implies that they were not consulted on the placement of the oil rig.[79] The Crisis Group report also points out that 'in internal memos, closed-door conferences, and briefings to senior officials,' the mainstream view among Chinese analysts was that the decision was erroneous and unwise.[80]

There also seems to be an element of path dependency in the decision. In June 2012, in retaliation to Vietnam's state oil and gas group PetroVietnam's plan to invite Japanese firms to participate in the joint development of about 20 oil and gas projects[81] and the 'Vietnamese Law of the Sea' passed by the Vietnamese National Assembly, CNOOC announced just a few days later the invitation of international bids for 9 oil and gas blocks.[82] This explains why Chinese MoFA spokesperson had at various occasions claimed that similar Chinese exploration and drilling activities had been going on for 'a decade in the same waters,' and this was only a 'natural continuation' of past activities.[83]

[74]Interview with retired government official who worked on Vietnamese affairs, 2 June 2017, Beijing.
[75]PRC MoFA, 'Foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying's regular press conference on 11 June 2014', available at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1164598.shtml (accessed 28 December 2018).
[76]PRC MoFA, '外交部边海司副司长易先良就中建南项目举行吹风会' ['Deputy Director General of the Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs Yi Xianliang's Press Conference on the Zhongjiannan Project'], (14 June 2014), available at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjb_673085/zzjg_673183/t1165600.shtml (accessed 28 December 2018).
[77]'Vietnam, China agree to restore, develop ties', *Nhan Dan*/VNA, (27 August 2014), available at: http://en.nhandan.org.vn/politics/external-relations/item/2753802-na-chairman-meets-young-japanese-parliamentarians.html (accessed 28 December 2018).
[78]International Crisis Group, 'Stirring up the South China Sea (III): a fleeting opportunity for calm', Report No. 267, (7 May 2015), p. 10, available at: https://www.crisisgroup. org/asia/north-east-asia/china/stirring-south-china-sea-iii-fleeting-opportunity-calm (accessed 28 December 2018).
[79]Interview with Chinese analyst, Washington DC, 20 November 2017.
[80]International Crisis Group, 'Stirring up the South China Sea', p. 5.
[81]'Vietnam to propose oil, gas development with Japan,' *Thanh Nien News*, 13 June 2012, available at: http://www.thanhniennews.com/business/vietnam-to-propose-oil-gas-development-with-japan-media-6807.html (accessed 28 December 2018).
[82]'中海油在南海开放9个区块与外国公司合作开发' ['CNOOC Opens Tender to Foreign Companies for 9 Oil and Gas Blocks'], *Tencent News*, (26 June 2012), available at: https://news.qq.com/a/20120626/001565.htm (accessed 28 December 2018).
[83]These wordings have been mentioned at multiple occasions, for an example, see PRC MoFA, 'Foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying's regular press conference on 18 June 2014', 19 June 2014, available at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1166826.shtml (accessed 28 December 2018).

Hanoi reacted vehemently to the Chinese placement of the oil rig. After a phone call between Vietnam Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh and China's State Councilor Yang Jiechi on May 6 failed to reach an agreement, Hanoi appealed to the UN, the ASEAN, and the United States for support.[84] On 7 May, Vietnam circulated a note at the UN to protest the Chinese action. On 11 May, Vietnam Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung delivered a speech at the 24th ASEAN Summit, stressing that 'the incident constituted a direct threat to peace, stability, maritime safety and security in the East Sea.'[85] On 6 May, the US State Department spokesperson singled out China's behavior as 'provocative and unhelpful.'[86] The US State released a press statement the next day accusing China's 'unilateral action' as 'part of a broader pattern of Chinese behavior to advance its claims over disputed territory in a manner that undermines peace and stability in the region.'[87] On 21 May, Vietnam Foreign Minister Pham Bihn Minh called US secretary of State John Kerry to discuss the matter.

Caught off-guard by the chain of reactions and realizing the grave risk of tipping the Vietnamese domestic political scale further towards the anti-China factions, Beijing needed a face-saving retreat as a way out of the conundrum. Retreating immediately was not an option, because that would signal Beijing's weakness to both a domestic and an international audience. State Councilor Yang Jiechi's visit to Hanoi on 18 June was a strong signal that both sides were willing to work out a peaceful solution. The Vietnam-China Joint Steering Committee for Bilateral Cooperation, under whose umbrella State Councilor Yang visited Hanoi, 'ha[s] an established practice of meeting annually,' but the specific timing of the meeting was decided on short notice.[88] As is common with Chinese foreign policy practice, using seemingly routine meetings at long-established multilateral or bilateral frameworks is a traditional face-saving way for Chinese leaders to initiate talks on more urgent matters without appearing too eager. In Beijing's perspective, the Vietnamese government tolerated, if not 'connived,' the rioters in burning down several Chinese-owned factories and caused deaths and damages, so China should not appear too eager to make up.

Beijing also needed to stand its ground on the sea in the confrontations with Vietnamese ships in order to uphold its territorial claims and to protect the valuable and vulnerable oil rig. As for Hanoi's accusation of the Chinese physical aggressiveness on the sea, such as ramming Vietnamese ships and firing water cannons, the Chinese cordon was obviously there to protect the oil rig, not to harass the Vietnamese ships, unless they misunderstood the Vietnamese ships' intentions. Even the Vietnamese MoFA spokesperson used the word 'protect' when he was referring to the Chinese behavior.[89] Besides, as mentioned earlier, incidental collisions in such a crowded space was almost inevitable.

Some also cite examples of economic sanctions as Chinese aggressive intention towards Vietnam. Malesky and Morris-Jung state that 'Retail trade with China dipped noticeably in the second half of 2014,'[90] but Poh reports that 'the trade account between China and Vietnam in 2014 continued to increase.'[91] The authors' examination of data from the World Integrated Trade

[84]Vietnam MoFA, 'Họp báo quốc tế về việc Trung Quốc hạ đặt giàn khoan trái phép trong vùng biển Việt Nam ['International press conference on China's drilling rig in Vietnam's waters'], (7 May 2014), available at: http://www.mofa.gov.vn/vi/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns140509011156 (accessed 9 May 2018).

[85]Vietnam MoFA, 'Regular press briefing by MOFA's spokesperson Le Hai Binh on 15 May 2014', (15 May 2014), available at: http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns140516233943 (accessed 9 May 2018).

[86]Jen Psaki, 'Daily press briefing: 6 May 2014', U.S. Department of State, Washington DC, available at: https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/05/225687.htm (accessed 9 May 2018).

[87]Jen Psaki, 'Vietnam/China: Chinese Oil Rig Operations Near the Paracel Islands', 7 May 2014, Washington DC, available at: https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/05/225750.htm (accessed 9 May 2018).

[88]PRC MoFA, 'Foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying's regular press conference on 17 June 2014', available at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1166317.shtml (accessed 28 December 2018).

[89]Vietnam MoFA, 'The 6th regular press conference', (28 June 2014), available at: http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_baochi/tcbc/ns140628000810 (accessed 28 December 2018).

[90]Malesky and Morris-Jung, 'Vietnam in 2014,' p. 172.

[91]Angela Poh, 'The myth of Chinese sanctions over south China sea disputes', *The Washington Quarterly* 40(1), (2017), p. 153.

Solution (WITS) and the General Statistics Office of Vietnam (GSOV) confirms Poh's observation.[92] Total retail bilateral trade increased from US$ 50.0 billion in 2013 to 58.6 billion in 2014, and continued to rise since. The second half of 2014 did not dip either, with the first half of 27.8 billion and the second half of 30.8 billion. The only dip is in tourism, but the travel advisories and cancelled chartered flights were not limited to China.[93] According to Poh's interviews with Vietnamese diplomats and analysts, although sanctions were expected, they were not employed, or not even threatened.

Fortunately, Beijing did not face a strong public opinion as Hanoi did, so pursuing a moderate policy was relatively easier. Despite the overall strong nationalism in China on the South China Sea dispute, the public held a relatively mild opinion towards the specific dispute with Vietnam in 2014. The year 2013 and the first half of 2014 was an uneventful time between China and Vietnam on the dispute. The absence of any major disturbance for an extended period of time allowed the nationalist emotions to subside temporarily. Although still having the potential to be rekindled, the Chinese nationalist sentiment on this dispute at this particular time was calm—much to the contrast on the Vietnamese. Several journalists and editors interviewed observe public opinion before and during the crisis to be 'calm,' if not 'aloof,' and 'definitely less feverish than before the 2012 Sino-Philippines Scarborough Shoal standoff or the 2016 Sino-Philippines arbitration case.' Except for the riots, they saw 'little news value' in the dispute.[94]

The Baidu Search Index (BSI), an analytic tool that tracks the daily volume of search activity on given keywords on Baidu.com, China's dominant search engine, offers a useful measurement for the level of public attention in China. Figure 1 shows the daily search index of the word 'South China Sea' in the BSI during the 1-year precrisis period. This period featured stable and relatively low index compared to other periods, with just a few mild surges and averaged at 1713. For comparison, the all-time average of search volume during noncrisis periods between 1 January 2011 and 15 October 2017 is 2773.[95]

According to the *South China Sea Public Opinion Newsletter*, a monthly newsletter that regularly monitors public opinion on the South China Sea dispute, the first half of 2014 shows low level of public attention in social media, and almost all online discussions were exclusively about the dispute with the Philippines or the US' involvement.[96] Given the weak public opinion and Beijing's moderate policy intent, a propaganda campaign to moderate public opinion is not needed, so Beijing chose to stay quiet.

## An alternative explanation: audience cost?

Was Hanoi trying to tie its own hands by stoking nationalism and to incur a domestic audience cost as leverage to coerce Beijing to back down? Hanoi had coercive goals during the crisis. One of these goals was to prevent the Chinese oil rig from drilling in the area and to force it to leave. As argued earlier, Hanoi did make public threats, but these threats were vague and weak.

[92]The WITS incorporates data from the World Bank, the UNSD Commodity Trade (UN Comtrade) database, the WTO's Integrated Data Base (IDB) and others. There is only trivial difference between the WITS data and the GSOV data. No data source is cited in the Malesky and Morris-Jung claim.

[93]Poh, 'The Myth', p. 153.

[94]Interview with Chinese journalists and editors, 29 May, 31 May 2017, 2017, and 1 June 2017, Beijing.

[95]BSI data is available between 1 January 2011 and 15 October 2017. The indices are not the actual number of daily searches but an indicator that reflects the 'relative' level of search activity. The formulae are not transparent, but it takes in account China's increasing population of internet users, so these data are comparable over time and between different keywords searched. The authors excluded data during three crisis periods related to the South China Sea because the data during these crises would puff up the average. The excluded periods include 5/26–6/26/2011 during the Sino-Vietnamese cable cutting incidents, 4/12–6/4/2012 during the Sino-Philippines Scarborough Shoal standoff, and 6/1–8/1/2016 during the Sino-Philippines arbitration crisis.

[96]Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies at Nanjing University, *The South China Sea Public Opinion Newsletter*, January, February, March, and April 2014.

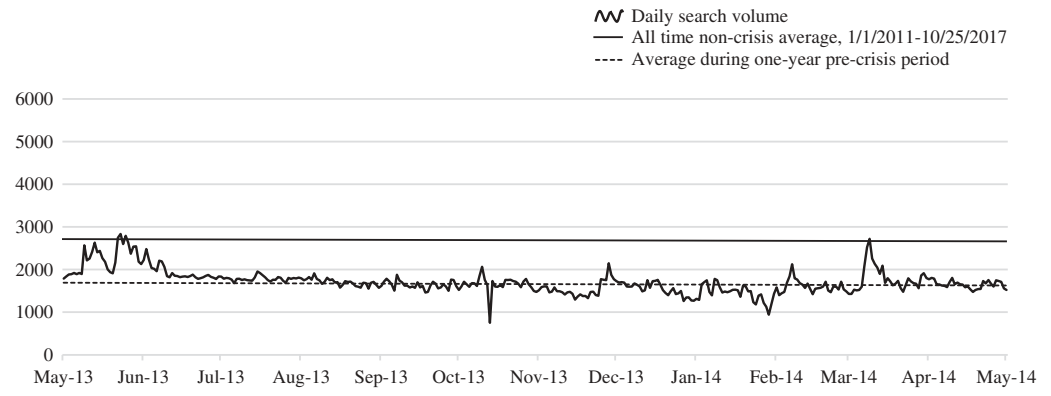


**Figure 1.** Daily search volume of 'South China Sea' on Baidu.com During 5/2/2013–5/2/2014.

Three questions remain to further evaluate the strength of an audience cost explanation. First, was the nationalist expression organic or state-instigated? In other words, did Hanoi try to tie its own hands by encouraging nationalist expressions and thus intentionally incurring an audience cost? Second, did Hanoi use the strong nationalist sentiment as leverage in negotiations with Beijing? Third, did Beijing believe that Hanoi was constrained domestically by its public? If Hanoi deliberately tied its hands by instigating nationalism, then used it in coercing Beijing to move the rig, and if Beijing believed that Hanoi was indeed constrained by its domestic public, then an audience cost explanation would be strongly supported.

The answer to the first question is a limited yes. As mentioned earlier, Hanoi allowed and at times even encouraged the public protests. But strong genuine public opinion had already existed before the crisis. Hanoi only played a facilitating role in aiding the strong expressions of public sentiment, but not without limits—once it got out of hand on 13 May, the government clamped down.

On the second question, the content of the conversations between the two countries' leaders and diplomatic representatives is not fully available to evaluate whether domestic public opinion was used as leverage. But from what is known, evidence is generally lacking to support the utility of the strong public opinion to Hanoi's position. If anything, the violent protests became more of a liability than leverage. Beijing put the blame squarely on Hanoi in failing to prevent the riots. Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, and South Korea, whose factories were all targeted, expressed grave concerns for public safety. Investor confidence was also hurt. Vietnamese stocks tumbled. So it was highly unlikely that the strong public opinion was ever used as leverage in coercing Beijing to retreat.

On the third question, Beijing had good reasons to be skeptical to the constraining power of an audience cost to Hanoi. Sharing a similar regime type and common experiences dealing with nationalistic publics, Beijing understood Hanoi had means to deescalate the rhetoric and calm the public. Frames such as invoking the nation's peaceful identity, the economic costs of war, possible mediation by the UN, and the threat of economic sanctions have proven effect in reducing cost from backing down in a Chinese context.[97] If Hanoi chose to, Beijing believed that Hanoi had the same set of tools available to them. In fact, Beijing ridiculed Hanoi's blunder in fermenting extreme nationalist sentiment and causing it to backfire. A *Global Times* editorial commented that Hanoi 'does not know the danger of playing with extreme nationalism and does not have the ability to control violence.'[98] As it turned out, Hanoi was able to perform a moderate foreign policy without much domestic constraint.

[97]Kai Quek and Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Can China back down? Crisis de-escalation in the shadow of popular opposition', *International Security* 42(3), (2018), pp. 7–36.

[98]'社评: 越南打砸抢烧在世界面前丢人现眼' ['Editorial: The beating, smashing, looting, and burning shamed Vietnam in front of the whole world'], *Huanqiu Shibao*, (16 May 2014), available at: http://opinion.huanqiu.com/editorial/2014-05/4996625.html (accessed 1 February 2019).

As the above reasoning suggests, although evidence cannot rule out the possibility of an intention by Hanoi to incur a domestic audience cost to enhance its threat credibility against China, the lack of a clear and resolute threat casts doubt on such a possibility. We will not know for certain until documents on the internal Vietnamese deliberations become available. But it is certain that Hanoi was not successful in incurring an audience cost or using it against China.

The audience cost explanation is also hard to square with Beijing's behavior. Beijing also had coercive goals in the crisis: to stop the Vietnamese interference in the oil rig's exploration activities and to prevent the Vietnamese ships from ramming the rig; to keep Hanoi from enlarging the matter by resorting to international forums such as the UN or the ASEAN, pursuing legal means, or appealing to the United States and other powers; to have Hanoi keep a lid on domestic nationalist expressions and clamp down on the riots. But Beijing chose to forgo the opportunity of incurring audience cost to buttress these coercions. The outcome of China's media behavior contradicts an audience cost prediction. This is due to the concern that a hardline public opinion would constrain flexibility for a moderate policy choice.

## Beyond the crisis

CNOOC announced on 16 July 2014 that its drilling platform HYSY-981 had completed its exploration 'smoothly and on schedule' and it was withdrawing the rig.[99] Clearly the venture had not been smooth, and the rig was withdrawn a month before its scheduled completion. There have been as many explanations for the early withdrawal as there were for the original placement, but subsequent actions by both China and Vietnam have demonstrated their mutual interest in avoiding further crises.[100] In late August, a special envoy of CPV Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong made a brief but well publicized visit to Beijing at the invitation of the CPC Central Committee. On the eve of the visit, Vietnam announced that it would provide humanitarian assistance to workers injured in the riots, and China acknowledged the gesture.[101] Most of the workers evacuated by China returned.[102] In October, China's Minister of Defense invited a high-level delegation of Vietnamese generals to Beijing to discuss crisis avoidance in the future.[103] In 2016, China and Vietnam conducted a joint exploration of marine mineral resources beyond the mouth of the Gulf of Tonkin, and in January 2017, the General Secretaries of the CPC and VCP issued a joint statement on managing maritime differences.[104]

Since 2014, there have not been any crises in the Vietnam–China relationship comparable to the oil rig crisis. Nevertheless, China's increased construction in the South China Sea and its reaction to the Permanent Court of Arbitration's (PCA) ruling in favor of the Philippines shows that differences of interest persist. The diplomatic challenge is how to prevent each country's pursuit of conflicting interests from escalating into mutually disadvantageous crises. The short-term solution is better communication. The long-term solution is a region-wide commitment to a Code of Conduct (CoC) in the South China Sea. Over

[99]'CNPC Finds Oil and Gas Shows in South China Sea', *Offshore Energy Today*, 16 July 2014, available at https://www.offshoreenergytoday.com/cnpc-finds-oil-and-gas-shows-in-south-china-sea/ (accessed 28 December 2018).

[100]Alexander Vuving, 'Did China Blink in the South China Sea?', *National Interest*, (27 July 2014), available at: https://nationalinterest.org/feature/did-china-blink-the-south-china-sea-10956 (accessed 1 February 2019); Carl Thayer, 'Vietnam, China and the oil rig crisis: who blinked?', *National Interest*, (4 August 2014), available at: https://thediplomat.com/2014/08/vietnam-china-and-the-oil-rig-crisis-who-blinked/ (accessed 1 February 2019).

[101]'Remarks by MOFA's Spokeman Le Hai Binh on 25 August 2014', available at: http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns140825093826/view (accessed 28 December 2018).

[102]Shannon Tiezi, 'Vietnam sends envoy on ice-breaking trip to China', *The Diplomat*, 26 August 2014, available at: https://thediplomat.com/2014/08/vietnam-sends-envoy-on-ice-breaking-trip-to-china/ (accessed 1 February 2019).

[103]Carlyle A. Thayer, 'Vietnam Send High-Level Military Delegation to China', *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, (20 October 2014), available at: https://www.c3sindia.org/archives/vietnam-send-high-level-military-delegation-to-china/ (accessed 1 February 2019).

[104]'外媒关注中越同意管控海上分歧' ['Foreign Media Pays Attention to China-Vietnam Agreement on Managing Maritime Differences'], *Huanqiu Shibao*, 16 January 2017, available at: http://world.huanqiu.com/exclusive/2017-01/9951078.html (accessed 1 February 2019).

the course of 2017, China and ASEAN agreed on a draft framework for a CoC, and they agreed on a negotiating draft in June 2018.[105]

The CoC will not solve the problems of the South China Sea, and the maritime problems are only a part of the picture. The draft framework is general and does not address the sore points of the dispute.[106] Nevertheless, general and apparently empty agreements among contending parties can be important turning points in regional conflicts. The best example of an empty agreement becoming a watershed was the Berlin Four Powers Agreement of 1971. The agreement ended the phase of hostile confrontation begun by the Berlin Wall, opened possibilities of increased contact, set the stage for the1973 Basic Treaty, and was a milestone in Cold War détente. And yet the Agreement does not use the word 'Berlin' and left vague all contentious issues.[107] Ironically, the subsequent Basic Treaty, by recognizing two German states, allowed the international stand-down regarding Germany that was a precondition to eventual German reunification in 1989.

It is quite possible that in retrospect the oil rig crisis and the confrontation over the Permanent Court of Arbitration's (PCA) ruling for the Philippines will be seen as the high point of public dispute regarding sovereignty in the South China Sea. The oil rig crisis showed the danger of nationalist publics engaged in crises. With the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2014, China's bag of carrots has grown much larger. Meanwhile, the uncertainties that President Trump has introduced into American foreign policy make the United States a questionable ally.[108] A poll of Southeast Asian elites showed equal distrust of China and the United States.[109] China's neighbors will try to buffer their exposure to China by developing their other relationships, but as the center of East Asia's geography, population, and production, China has much to offer.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

***Frances Yaping Wang*** is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Singapore Management University. She was a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Notre Dame.

***Brantly Womack*** is C. K. Yen Professor of Foreign Affairs at the University of Virginia.

[105]'Chairman's Statement of the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference (PMC) 10 + 1 Sessions with the Dialogue Partners', (3 August 2018), available at: http://asean.org/chairmans-statement-asean-post-ministerial-conference-pmc-101-sessions-dialogue-partners/ (accessed 28 December 2018).

[106]Ian Storey, 'Assessing the ASEAN-China framework for the code of conduct for the South China Sea', *ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute Perspectives* 62, (2017), pp. 1–7.

[107]As Martin Hillibrand, who as Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs directed formal negotiations for the US, noted, 'One cannot help be struck by the peculiar juxtaposition of umbrella agreements with a congeries of subordinate agreements not negotiated or signed by the same parties who signed the basic Agreement.' Quoted in David Geyer, 'The Missing Link: Henry Kissinger and the back channel negotiations on Berlin''in David Geyer and Berndt Schaefer eds., *American Détente and German Ostpolitik, 1969–1972* (Washington: German Historical Institute, 2004), p. 91.

[108]Brantly Womack, 'International crises and china's rise: comparing the 2008 global financial crisis and the 2017 global political crisis', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 10(4), (2017), pp. 383–401.

[109]'Survey report: the state of Southeast Asia 2019', *ASEAN Focus* 1, (2019), pp. 6–16.